

Message Text

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SUBJECT: KEY FIGURES IN ASAD'S MILITARY COMMAND

1. SUMMARY: ACCORDING TO LOCAL SOURCE, MAJOR GENERAL SHIHABI HAS BEEN STRIPPED OF AUTHORITY AS SYRIAN COS AND IS ONLY BEING KEPT ON AS FIGUREHEAD. HE APPARENTLY EARNED ASAD'S DISFAVOR BY DISSENTING ON PRESIDENT'S HANDLING OF SYRIAN TROOP INVOLVEMENT IN LEBANON. BRIG. ALI DUBA, CHIEF OF MILITARY INTELLIGENCE, IS IN CHARGE OF THE ETAT MAJOR. DEFMIN TLAS, ACCORDING TO SOURCE, ALSO LITTLE MORE THAN SPEECHMAKER, BUT HIS DOWNFALL BEGAN SOME TIME AGO AND NOT CONNECTED WITH LEBANESE EVENTS. KEY FIGURES NOW RESPONSIBLE FOR SYRIAN MILITARY-POLITICAL DECISIONS IN LEBANON ARE PRES. ASAD, BRIG. ALI DUBA, COL. MUHAMMAD AL-KHULI, LT. COL. RIF'AT AL-ASAD, AND MAJ. GEN NAJI JAMIL. ALL EXCEPT LAST NAMED ARE ALAWITES. END SUMMARY.

2. EMBOFF OBTAINED FOLLOWING INFORMATION FROM A SYRIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENT WHO IS ACQUAINTED WITH SON OF CHIEF OF STAFF HIKMAT SHIHABI. IT IS BELIEVED THAT SHIHABI'S SON, A SECOND-YEAR MEDICAL STUDENT AT DAMASCUS UNIVERSITY, IS THE SOURCE OF THIS INFORMATION.

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3. SOURCE STATED GENERAL SHIHABI NO LONGER HAS AUTHORITY

OF CHIEF OF STAFF. BRIGADIER ALI DUBA, THE ALAWITE CHIEF OF MILITARY INTELLIGENCE, NOW MAKES ALL DECISIONS AND HAS RESPONSIBILITY FOR COORDINATING MILITARY OPERATIONS. SHIHABI REPORTEDLY WISHED TO FOLLOW A POLICY OF POLITICAL RATHER THAN MILITARY ACTION IN LEBANON AND HAD REFUSED FOR SEVERAL DAYS (PRESUMABLY LAST JUNE) TO ORDER ADVANCE OF SYRIAN TROOPS BEYOND BEKAA VALLEY. SHIHABI SUBSEQUENTLY WAS PLACED UNDER HOUSE ARREST BUT WAS LATER ALLOWED TO RETURN TO HIS OFFICE WHERE HE MET VISITORS AND MAINTAINED SEMBLANCE OF CONTINUING IN COMMAND BUT WAS NOT PERMITTED TO MAKE DECISIONS OR GIVE ORDERS TO SUBORDINATES. SOURCE STATED THAT SARG FELT IT NECESSARY TO LEAVE SHIHABI IN PLACE FOR INTERNAL REASONS AND TO MINIMIZE DISRUPTION OF SYRIAN EFFORTS IN LEBANON.

4. SOURCE STATED MINDEF MUSTAFA TLAS NO LONGER WIELDS POWER HE ONCE HAD BUT SIMPLY DOES AS HE IS TOLD. MAJOR GENERAL NAJI JAMIL, DEPUTY MINDEF AND AIR FORCE COMMANDER, IS THE REAL AUTHORITY IN MINISTRY. EROSION OF TLAS'S POWER BEGAN SEVERAL YEARS AGO WHEN, HAVING BEEN IN RANK OVER SEVEN YEARS, TLAS REPORTEDLY REQUESTED PROMOTION. PRES. ASAD REFUSED, SINCE THAT WOULD GIVE TLAS SAME MILITARY RANK AS ASAD HIMSELF. ASAD'S DECISION GRADUALLY TO RESTRICT TLAS'S AUTHORITY DATES FROM THAT TIME. TLAS NOW FILLS THE CHAIR BUT DEVOTES HIS TIME MAINLY TO MAKING SPEECHES AND VISITING TROOPS, ESPECIALLY DURING FEASTS AND COMMEMORATIVE OCCASIONS. (COMMENT. IT MUST BE ADMITTED HE CARRIES OUT THIS ROLE WITH CONSIDERABLE SWAGGER. SOME OBSERVERS CREDIT HIS DECLINE TO SIMPLE INCOMPETENCE.)

5. SOURCE STATED THAT GENERAL NAJI JAMIL, IN ADDITION TO HIS MILITARY AUTHORITY, WAS ALSO INVOLVED IN FOREIGN POLICY DECISION MAKING, WITH INFLUENCE EQUAL TO FONMIN KHADDAM. HE SAID THAT THERE WAS ALREADY GRUMBLING ABOUT JAMIL'S GROWING POWER.

6. COMMENT: ABOVE REPORT TRACKS WELL WITH OTHER COMMENTS WE HAVE HEARD REGARDING DE FACTO DEMOTION SHIHABI AND TLAS AND INCREASING INFLUENCE OF JAMIL. WE HAD HEARD SEVERAL RUMORS OVER PAST MONTHS OF SHIHABI BEING UNDER HOUSE ARREST
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AND NOTE THAT HE WAS IN LONDON FOR WHAT WE UNDERSTAND TO BE MINOR MEDICAL TREATMENT DURING THE METN CAMPAIGN (IR-6891046076). WERE SHIHABI THE FULL, FUNCTIONING COS, IT IS UNLIKELY THAT ASAD WOULD HAVE PERMITTED HIM TO BE ABSENT DURING THIS CRITICAL PERIOD. SHIHABI HAS NOW RETURNED TO DAMASCUS AND WAS PRESENT, BUT NOT PROMINENT, IN WREATH-LAYING CEREMONY ON AIR FORCE DAY, OCT. 16

7. REASONS BEHIND SHIHABI'S DEMOTION ARE MURKY. AT THE HEIGHT OF HIS INVOLVEMENT IN LEBANESE CRISIS, SHIHABI MAINTAINED CLOSE CONTACT WITH LEBANESE G-2 CHIEF JULIUS BUSTANI AND FRANGIE'S ADVISOR LUCIEN DAHDAH AND MAY HAVE FELT CONFIDENT THAT THESE RELATIONSHIPS COULD LEAD TO PEACEFUL SETTLEMENT. ON THE OTHER HAND, SHIHABI HAD COMMENTED IMPATIENTLY TO AMBASSADOR DURING MEETING LAST MARCH ON NEED FOR "MILITARY SOLUTION." FOR WHATEVER REASON, SHIHABI'S REPORTED FALL FROM GRACE MAY BE WHY HE MADE HIMSELF UNAVAILABLE TO AMBASSADOR OVER PAST FEW MONTHS RATHER THAN SPECIFIC SYRIAN DECISION TO FORECLOSE THIS CHANNEL TO US. (PRESIDENCY DID, HOWEVER, ARRANGE INSTANT MEETING WITH SHIHABI WHEN AMBASSADOR SOUGHT HIS HELP IN CONNECTIONS AMB. MELOY'S KIDNAPPING JUNE 17. SHIHABI THAT DAY RECEIVED AMBASSADOR AT HIS APARTMENT, IN UNIFORM, AND BETRAYED NO UNUSUAL BEHAVIOR.)

8. ASAD APPEARS TO BE CONDUCTING LEBANESE POLICY THROUGH CORE GROUP OF TRUSTED OFFICERS: MAJOR GENERAL NAJI JAMIL (SUNNI), BRIG. ALI DUBA (ALAWITE, COL. MOHAMMED AL-KHULI (ALAWITE), AND LT. COL. RIF'AT AL-ASAD (ALAWITE). OF THESE, NAJI JAMIL APPEARS TO WIELD THE MOST POWER. HE EXERCISES THIS POWER THROUGH HIS VARIOUS OFFICIAL RESPONSIBILITIES AS MEMBER OF BAATH PARTY NATIONAL COMMAND, DEPUTY DEFENSE MINISTER, AIR FORCE COMMANDER, AND CHIEF OF THE SUPREME STATE SECURITY COUNCIL AND ALSO THROUGH HIS CURRENT DESIGNATION AS ASAD'S CHIEF NEGOTIATOR IN QUADRI-PARTITE COMMITTEE IN LEBANON.

9. RIF'AT AL-ASAD MAY NOT PARTICIPATE AS DIRECTLY IN DECISIONMAKING AS THE OTHERS, BUT HE REMAINS A CENTRAL FIGURE OF ASAD REGIME. ACCORDING TO A RELIABLE SOURCE, HE RECEIVES COPIES OF ALL ORDERS AFFECTING
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ARMY TROOP MOVEMENTS AS PART OF HIS "COUP-PREVENTION" ROLE. HIS DEFENSE SQUADRONS HAVE ALSO BEEN USED IN SOME CRITICAL LEBANESE OPERATIONS. MAINTENANCE OF TLAS AND SHIHABI, BOTH SENIOR SUNNI OFFICERS, AS FIGUREHEADS MAY BE DESIGNEDHVO DOWNPLAY PUBLICLY AWARENESS THAT SUNNI COUNTERBALANCE TO ALAWITE CONTROL OF TOP-LEVEL NATIONAL SECURITY LEADERSHIP HAS BEEN SHARPLY REDUCED. IT ALSO LEAVES OPEN POSSIBILITY OF THEIR AUTHORITY BEING EASILY RESTORED WHEN AND IF IT SUITS ASAD'S PURPOSES IN FUTURE.
MURPHY

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